

A Downward Spiral? A Panel Study of Misinformation and Media Trust in Chile

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Abstract

Despite widespread concern, research on the consequences of misinformation on people's attitudes is surprisingly scant. To fill in this gap, the current study examines the long-term relationship between misinformation and trust in the news media. Based on the reinforcing spirals model, we analyzed data from a three-wave panel survey collected in Chile between 2017 and 2019. We found a weak, over-time relationship between misinformation and media skepticism. Specifically, initial beliefs on factually dubious information were negatively correlated with subsequent levels of trust in the news media. Lower trust in the media, in turn, was related over time to higher levels of misinformation. However, we found no evidence of a reverse, parallel process where media trust shielded users against misinformation, further reinforcing trust in the news media. The lack of evidence of a downward spiral suggests that the corrosive effects of misinformation on attitudes toward the news media are less serious than originally suggested. We close with a discussion of directions for future research.

Keywords

misinformation, media trust, social media, reinforcing spirals, media effects, selectivity, panel surveys

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A long-term decline in public confidence in the news media has been noted in several parts around the world, especially in Europe and the Americas (Newman et al. 2019; Tandoc et al. 2018). There is no single cause for this trend, as scholars have traced growing media skepticism to individual, mediated, and contextual factors (Ognyanova 2019). In this study, we examine whether misinformation spread on social media may be another determinant of declining media trust, while accounting for the possibility that media trust shields users from becoming misinformed. More specifically, based on the reinforcing spirals model (RSM; Slater et al. 2020), we test for the existence of reciprocal relationships between misinformation and media trust, and how these relationships may fluctuate over the long term. To do so, we take advantage of an original three-wave panel survey fielded in Chile between 2017 and 2019 that tracked exposure and beliefs regarding factually dubious content, and attitudes towards the news media.

This research is important on three accounts. To date, most research has focused on how misinformation spreads online and why some individuals are prone to develop misperceptions (e.g., Guess et al. 2019; Pennycook and Rand 2019; Vosoughi et al. 2018). Studies on the consequences of misinformation, however, are surprisingly rare (for exceptions, see Jones-Jang et al. 2020; Ognyanova et al. 2020; Vaccari and Chadwick 2020). That is, we know little about the effects of exposure to misinformation on attitudes and behaviors (Weeks and Gil de Zúñiga 2021). Furthermore, to the degree that misinformation is an evolving problem, few studies have analyzed the phenomenon over time, with the bulk of the research analyzing one-time events. Finally, when misinformation effects are studied, there is a tendency to posit lineal, one-way relationships, rather than the most likely possibility of reciprocal paths of influence.

Our findings suggest a process where misinformation is correlated with a slight increase in media skepticism. Higher levels of media skepticism, in turn, are associated with a subsequent increase in misinformation. However, we do not find evidence of an equivalent process of reinforcement of attitudes towards the news media. To reach these conclusions, we first review the literature on misinformation and media trust and hypothesize how these different phenomena may influence each other. Then we describe the RSM, from which we derive additional research questions. Third, we describe our methods, including the context of the study, and then we present the results of the statistical analyses. Finally, we elaborate on the main contributions, limitations, and directions for future research.

Definition and Antecedents of Misinformation

Fake news, junk news, pseudo-information, rumors, conspiracies, misleading information, fabricated content—several types of content have been labeled (or confounded with) misinformation. This is not surprising because misinformation is an “umbrella term” comprising several factors (Wittenberg and Berinsky 2020: 168). The first is truth value, that is, it fluctuates from completely fabricated claims to merely unsubstantiated claims. Second, the term may refer to false information, false beliefs, or both. Third, it varies in format. For instance, it can be delivered through advertisements,

stories that mimic professional news, or humorous memes. Last, the intentions behind its production or circulation may range from a complete lack of awareness that the claim is false to an orchestrated campaign with the intent to deceive.

In the current study, we adopt Wittenberg and Berinsky's (2020) approach and define misinformation as exposure and beliefs in claims that are not supported by most societally accepted evidence adjudicators. These claims can include rumors and conspiracies, and also content that is inaccurate, uncertain, vague, or ambiguous (Southwell et al. 2018; Valenzuela et al. 2019). As we cannot ascertain intentions, we do not distinguish whether these claims are spread with an intent to deceive or not.

The antecedents of misinformation comprise both individual and structural factors. Starting with motivated reasoning (Kunda 1990), it has been argued that people often engage in a reasoning process designed to maintain, rather than change, their perceptions of reality even when facing information that contradicts their initial beliefs. Thus, motivated reasoning may explain the credibility and acceptance of misinformation (Bode and Vraga 2015). Some studies, however, question whether motivated reasoning is the main determinant of beliefs about dubious information (Clayton et al. 2019). Instead, misinformation may result from lack of analytical thinking (Pennycook and Rand 2019). In terms of structural factors, it has been noted that misinformation spreads through polarized networks and so-called online echo chambers, which are centered in specific narratives (Del Vicario et al. 2016). There is evidence that social media users tend to join communities that share their values, which then reinforce their pre-existing beliefs (Bessi 2016). Thus, network structures have an important role in modeling beliefs, especially when individuals face misinformation that confirms their initial priors.

Definition and Antecedents of Media Trust

Media skepticism, media distrust, news credibility, and public trust in the media—scholars have used different labels to describe media trust. There is not yet a unified understanding of how media trust should be defined or measured. Instead, conceptualizations have evolved alongside with changes in media technology (Fisher 2018). Nevertheless, at the broadest level, it is possible to argue that media trust refers to the relationship between citizens (trustors) and news media organizations (trustees), where there is an expectation from citizens that the news media will perform in a satisfactory manner (Strömbäck et al. 2020). Expectations can vary widely but researchers tend to include aspects such as providing news that are accurate, balanced, and current (Abdulla et al. 2005). Importantly, the media referred here are the traditional mainstream media, which belong to media corporations, have large audiences, and follow standards such as delivering accurate information.

Existing research finds that both individual and contextual variables are predictive of media trust. Among individual-level factors, news media exposure, education, and partisanship have been found in cross-national studies to be important correlates of media trust (Hopmann et al. 2015; Ognyanova 2019; Tsfati and Ariely 2014). In addition to these microlevel influences, research has found that tabloid-style news

coverage, or coverage that focuses on the strategic aspects of politics, can reduce trust in media (Ladd 2012). Another contextual determinant is the political system; there is a strong correlation between levels of support (or disdain) for political institutions and media trust (Hanitzsch et al. 2018). The emergence of new media sources and formats may also influence trust in the news media. Indeed, alternative media and new groups (e.g., trolls, conspiracy theorists, etc.) are competing for the attention of mainstream media audiences, and often question the credibility of professional news organizations (Marwick and Lewis 2017). Nonetheless, there is little empirical evidence regarding the success of these media in affecting the public's evaluations of mainstream media (Van Duyn and Collier 2019).

Linking Misinformation with Media Trust

Most research on the effects of misinformation focuses on attitudes, rather than behaviors, with erosion of trust being the most studied outcome. In line with concerns about the possible effects of so-called “fake news,” a panel study conducted in 2018 in the United States found that perceptions of exposure to misinformation through social media elicits political cynicism (Jones-Jang et al. 2020). Ognyanova et al. (2020) fielded a two-wave panel study among a U.S. sample and found that exposure to misinformation during a one-month period predicted a 5 percent decrease in media trust among respondents. Likewise, Guess et al. (2020) combined data from a series of panel surveys with behavioral data on respondents' web visits collected weeks before the surveys. Their results showed that exposure to untrustworthy content was negatively correlated with news media trust. Outside the United States, an online survey conducted in South Africa found a negative relationship between perceived exposure to misinformation and media trust (Wasserman and Madrid-Morales 2019).

The mechanisms behind the negative effects of misinformation on media trust are varied. Some authors point to the divisive, dramatic content of false stories, which often include attacks on the mainstream media (Ognyanova et al. 2020). It is also likely that misinformation makes users question the credibility of all sources, whether accurate or not (Gastil and Marriott 2018). There is evidence of a “tainted truth” effect, which occurs when warnings about misinformation make individuals discredit correct information (Echterhof et al. 2007). This is consistent with the finding that merely learning about politicians discuss about misinformation makes people trust the news media less (Van Duyn and Collier 2019). For all these reasons, we hypothesize:

H1: The more individuals are exposed to misinformation and find it credible, the less they trust the news media.

The influence of misinformation on media trust notwithstanding, it is likely that the causal arrow flows in the opposite direction. That is, media trust may also influence exposure to, and credibility of, misinformation. In one of the studies by Guess et al. (2020) cited earlier, a survey experiment manipulated exposure to false articles and

found no significant effects on media trust scores. These findings contrasted with the significant relationships found in the panel surveys, which led the authors to conclude that “people may choose to consume factually dubious content because they lack trust in the media” (p. 2). By extension, it could be argued that skepticism towards the media may increase exposure to dubious content, just as media trust may inoculate against misinformation. In fact, media trust is often considered a key factor in explaining cross-national differences in resilience against misinformation (Humprecht et al. 2020: 500). Research on news source preference is consistent with this expectation, too. Whereas individuals with high media trust are significantly more likely to select traditional news, those with low media trust prefer alternative media such as social platforms, where misinformation is more common (Fletcher and Park 2017). These studies suggest the following hypothesis:

H2: The less individuals trust the news media, the more they are exposed to misinformation and find it credible.

Media Trust and Misinformation Over Time

Rather than considering H1 and H2 as competing hypotheses, we believe they work in tandem. As exposure to misinformation erodes media trust, low credibility in the news media can motivate users to seek out alternative, yet factually dubious, sources. Theoretically speaking, our expectation is that the relationship between misinformation and media trust can be described in terms of the RSM (Slater et al. 2020). The RSM provides a general framework that explains how the selection of a media content and its respective effects are in fact integrated in a dynamic, longitudinal process.

Simply put, the RSM predicts that exposure to a specific type of media has some effects on attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. These effects, in turn, shape future selectivity and exposure to media content, such that over time there is a mutually reinforcing process. The positive feedback loop between media use and attitudes is not continuous, though. Media consumption is constrained by users’ available time and access, while attitude change is constrained by cognitive capacities. Furthermore, competing environmental, social, or psychological influences can inhibit the process of reinforcement (Slater et al. 2020). Typically, then, these competing forces produce homeostasis—a dynamic equilibrium or stability between media use and beliefs. However, when users feel that their social identity is threatened, the RSM predicts that a spiraling process may occur. For instance, it has been found that strong partisans increase their ideological media consumption when living in areas where their party is in the minority (Long et al. 2019). In this case, selecting attitude-consistent information is a way of maintaining and validating an identity that they feel is threatened by a hostile opinion climate. Consumption of partisan sources, in turn, can increase individuals’ attitude strength (Wojcieszak et al. 2016).

A similar process of reinforcement could describe the relationship between misinformation and media cynicism. Existing research shows that discrediting scientific claims in news stories that argue against a preferred lifestyle (e.g., videogaming,

antivaccination) is a typical response of people supporting such a lifestyle (e.g., gamers, antivaxxers; see Nauroth et al. 2015). Discrediting verified news that is threatening to a personal or social identity—that is, reacting with a disconfirmation bias—may well lead to increased exposure and credibility in attitude-consistent misinformation.

The current context has increased the odds of identity threat among different social groups. First, many countries are witnessing a rise in populist worldviews that attack the news media as part of an elite that neglects people's interests (Fawzi 2019). This has coincided with a surge in alternative media that position themselves as "correctives" of the "failures" of mainstream news media (Holt et al. 2019). In response, several news organizations have adopted a more critical, oppositional stance against populist figures. A notable example is the case of the *New York Times* and former US President Donald Trump and (Lischka 2019). It should not come as a surprise, then, that people who identify with populist figures are becoming increasingly critical of traditional media, while embracing the conspiracies, rumors, and unsupported claims spread by these leaders and their alternative media (Waisbord 2018). Second, prominent social movements around historically marginalized groups, such as women, racial, cultural, and ethnic minorities, have developed over the last few years. Coverage of movements like #MeToo and Black Lives Matter in the mainstream media, especially when it is sympathetic, is likely to generate identity threat in individuals who are invested in traditional, hegemonic roles (Slater et al. 2020). To compensate, these individuals may question mainstream media coverage and seek out alternative media. At the same time, there is strong evidence that professional journalists usually delegitimize the claims of social movements (Harlow et al. 2020). Thus, negative coverage may also activate identity threat among supporters of these movements, who may become more critical of legacy media and turn to alternative news sources.

Prior studies based on the RSM have examined a wide variety of topics, including media use and political engagement among adolescents (Kruikemeier and Shehata 2017), and political advertising and affect towards immigrants (Schemer 2012). Most of these studies find positive, albeit weak, feedback loops, which is consistent with the tenets of the RSM about competitive influences. For instance, Dahlgren et al. (2019) examined the reciprocal influences between selective exposure and political attitudes in Sweden during 2014 and 2016 using the same research design as the one employed in the current study. The results of their cross-lagged model show that people select ideologically consistent news content, especially online, and such attitude-consistent exposure reinforces citizens' ideological leanings over time. However, all standardized path coefficients were modest (<0.10).

Furthermore, some research has found that the reinforcing spiral results from an asymmetrical, rather than symmetrical, process of influence. In a study about Facebook use and affective polarization, Beam et al. (2018) found that people with lower levels of polarization were more likely to show increases in their Facebook use, which led to over-time depolarization. However, there was no over-time relationship between Facebook news use in wave 1 on polarization in wave 2, and polarization

in wave 2 was unrelated to Facebook use in wave 3. Thus, evidence on the strength of reinforcement effects predicted by the RSM is mixed. Based on these considerations, we posit several research questions that seek to determine the nature and duration of positive feedback loops between misinformation and media trust:

RQ1: The negative relationship between initial levels of misinformation and subsequent levels of media trust becomes stronger, weaker, or remains unchanged over time?

RQ2: The negative relationship between initial levels of media trust and subsequent levels of misinformation becomes stronger, weaker, or remains unchanged over time?

RQ3: What is the relative strength of the relationship between initial levels of misinformation and subsequent levels of media trust compared with the relationship between initial levels of media trust and subsequent levels of misinformation?

Method

Context

We conducted our study in Chile, a high-income Latin American country with high levels of social media use and a free, albeit concentrated and conservative leaning, news media (Gronemeyer et al. 2021). Following global trends, Chile is experiencing a notable rise in social movements around issues of inequality, the environment, women's rights, and indigenous groups (von Bülow and Donoso 2017). Ideological and affective polarization, especially among political elites, has increased, too (Fábrega et al. 2018). Prior research shows that the spread of misinformation is particularly prevalent regarding public affairs, crime, science, and natural disasters (Valenzuela et al. 2019). At the same time, trust in the news media, especially legacy outlets, has decreased considerably after 2010—in part because journalists are increasingly perceived as representatives of political and economic elites (Newman et al. 2019). In this sense, the trends regarding misinformation and media trust are like those experienced by most developed democracies (Hanitzsch et al. 2018). Furthermore, fieldwork was carried during nonelectoral periods and finished well before the massive protests of October 2019. Thus, it could be argued that the relationships between misinformation and media trust were observed during “routine” times.

Survey Data

A three-wave survey developed by the authors was fielded using an opt-in online panel administered by Tren Digital (<http://tren-digital.cl/>), a research unit housed in the School of Communications at Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. To generate a more representative sample, we matched the frame to population parameters using three variables: gender, age, and region of residence. The first wave was fielded in

April 2017, the second wave in June 2018, and the third wave in May 2019. Because the RSM has no natural lag period, the timing of the surveys was designed to augment the possibility of exposure to misinformation—an infrequent type of media content (Allen et al. 2020)—while allowing sufficient time to observe changes in media trust, which is a rather stable attitude (Tsfati and Cohen 2005). In that sense, the study is designed to examine long-term mutual influences, in the vein of Dahlgren et al.'s (2019) study on media use and political ideology. Additionally, a one-year lag reduces the possibility of panel conditioning.

An initial sample of 5,000 panel participants were invited to fill out the first wave using the Qualtrics software. Of these, 1,007 participants completed the 2017 wave (completion rate = 20 percent), 451 completed the 2018 wave (attrition rate = 48 percent), and 331 completed the 2019 wave (attrition rate = 27 percent). Consequently, the final analysis was based on the 331 respondents that completed all three waves. To address selection biases and nonresponse, we compared the final sample to the initial sample as well as to population parameters (see Table A1 in the Supplemental Information file). Our participants were more likely to be female, better educated, be younger, and have a higher political interest than the population. Ideologically, however, our sample is similar to the general population. More importantly, we found no significant differences in sociodemographic, political, media, misinformation, and trust variables between wave-1 and wave-3 participants. To correct for deviations from the population, we included demographic, political, and media variables as controls.

Variables

Misinformation. In each wave, we presented respondents with a list of false statements that circulated online covering the domains of public affairs, crime, science, and natural disasters. Seven of these statements were asked in all waves: (1) Mapuche groups started the megafires that occurred on the summer of 2017; (2) forest companies started the megafires to collect insurance and reduce losses due to the drop in exports caused by the election of Donald Trump in 2016; (3) the consumption of animal milk does not nourish and, in some circumstances, it is even harmful; (4) some vaccines can cause autism in children; (5) eating genetically modified organisms, such as Monsanto seeds, is harmful to your health; (6) Israeli agents have bought large tracts of land in Chilean Patagonia; and (7) a gang of Colombian immigrants operates in Santiago that kidnaps children from schools. Our rationale for employing the same items was to augment the possibility of tapping the same dimensions of the construct across waves, while also measuring recurring types of misinformation, such as that surrounding vaccines, disasters, immigration, and so forth (in Table A2 of the Supplemental Information file we replicate the results using wave-specific items). For each statement, respondents were first asked whether they recalled it or not. Consistent with the infrequent nature of misinformation, each statement was recalled by a minority of respondents (2017: $M = 13.9$ percent, $SD = 19.7$ percent; 2018: $M = 8.4$ percent, $SD = 14.5$ percent; 2019: $M = 5.6$ percent, $SD = 10.9$ percent). For each recalled statement, a follow-up question measured how credible they found it using a 5-point

response scale (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *extremely*). Thus, misinformation was measured for recalled statements only. Individual items were then averaged into a scale of misinformation (2017: Cronbach's $\alpha = .72$, $M = 2.84$, $SD = 0.82$; 2018: Cronbach's $\alpha = .80$, $M = 2.90$, $SD = 0.92$; 2019: Cronbach's $\alpha = .76$, $M = 2.82$, $SD = 0.96$). We based this measurement approach on Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) and Valenzuela et al. (2019).

Media Trust. We selected three items from Abdulla et al.'s (2005) scale of news credibility, which measures the degree to which news media coverage is perceived as balanced, honest, and current, and added an original item on news sharing (i.e., "I trust stories shared by traditional media on social media platforms"). Respondents answered using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). Responses were then averaged to form a scale of media trust (2017: Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$, $M = 3.27$, $SD = 0.78$; 2018: Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$, $M = 3.34$, $SD = 0.81$; 2019: Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$, $M = 3.27$, $SD = 0.77$).

Control Variables. Based on prior research, we included in the analyses several covariates measured in the 2017 wave (Beam et al. 2018; Guess et al. 2019; Hopmann et al. 2015; Ognyanova 2019; Tsftati and Ariely 2014). Gender was a dichotomous variable (female = 58 percent). For education, we used a 7-point scale (range = 1 (*elementary school or less*) to 7 (*graduate school*), $M = 5.94$, $SD = 0.80$). Political ideology was gauged using a 7-point, left-right self-placement question ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 1.41$). Political interest was operationalized with a question asking the level of attention paid to political news ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 1.21$). For news exposure, respondents were asked the number of days per week that they watch, listen, or read news on television, radio, and newspapers. These responses were averaged into an index of news exposure on traditional media ($M = 3.05$, $SD = 1.76$). Likewise, we combined into an index of news exposure on digital media the frequency of news use on social media, and online news sites ($M = 4.88$, $SD = 1.97$).

Statistical Analysis

Reinforcing spirals are usually estimated with cross-lagged panel models and parallel latent growth models. To reduce the risk of false positive results, these models require variables to be reliable (so that variation over time cannot be attributed to measurement error) and that change over time (so that their variance cannot be fully explained by the autoregressive paths; Scharkow and Bachl 2019). As for the first condition, the scales for misinformation and media trust exhibited high reliability across all three waves (Cronbach α 's $> .70$). While the stability of media trust was higher than for misinformation, the test-retest correlations of key variables were less than perfect, ranging from .52 to .66 (see Table A3 in the Supplemental Information file). Although our data meets both conditions, the sample size prevented us from estimating the more complex latent growth model. Thus, we opted for the simpler cross-lagged model. Importantly, we estimated over-time effects of key variables controlling for the effects of the prior wave as well

as for contemporaneous relationships. Using Stata 15.1, we estimated a structural equation model with full information maximum likelihood.

Results

As shown in Figure 1, respondents who were more misinformed in 2017 expressed less credibility in the news media in 2018 ($b = -0.11$, $CI: -0.19$ to -0.02 ; see Tables A4 and A5 in the Supplemental Information file for full model results). Moreover, those who found the news media less credible in 2018 were more misinformed by 2019 ($b = -0.11$, $CI: -0.22$ to -0.003). In contrast to these results, we did not find significant relationships for the other path of the RSM. Specifically, ratings of media trust in 2017 were unrelated to misinformation in 2018 ($b = -0.05$, $CI: -0.16$ to 0.06). Likewise, there was no over-time relationship between misinformation in 2018 and media trust in 2019 ($b = 0.01$, $CI: -0.07$ to 0.08). Taken together, these results provide mixed support for H1 and H2.

We then examined RQ1 and RQ2, which address the temporal dynamics of the relationship between misinformation and media trust. More specifically, RQ1 asks whether the relationship between misinformation and media trust became stronger, weaker, or remained stable over time. The results in Table 1 show that this relationship became weaker ($z = 1.99$, $p < .05$). RQ2 asked whether the other path of the spiral, that is, the relationship between media trust and misinformation, became stronger, weaker, or remained unchanged. The z -tests did not yield a statistically significant difference in the coefficients across waves. This means that the negative relationship between media trust in 2018 and misinformation in 2019 is indistinguishable from that between media trust in 2017 and misinformation in 2018.

Last, RQ3 asks about the relative strength of the relationship between initial misinformation and subsequent media trust compared with the inverse relationship. For the first period, comparing 2017 and 2018, there was no difference between the two paths. For the second period, comparing 2018 and 2019, there was marginal evidence (at $p = .08$) that the correlation between media trust in 2018 and misinformation in 2019 was stronger than the correlation of misinformation in 2018 with media trust in 2019. This last result is consistent with the analysis of indirect effects of the structural model (see Table 2), which show a significant, albeit weak, negative indirect effect of media trust in 2017 on misinformation in 2019 (point estimate = -0.105 (95 percent bias-corrected bootstrap $CI: -0.209$ to -0.001)). Nevertheless, this finding may be an artifact of the slightly stronger autocorrelation of media trust, relative to misinformation, across waves. Thus, with these data, we cannot ascertain the existence of a self-reinforcing spiral process, nor can we establish whether such spiral would be fueled by a decline in media trust or an increase in misinformation.

Discussion

This study examined the dynamic relationship between misinformation and news media trust. Using a three-wave panel survey conducted in Chile, we found that

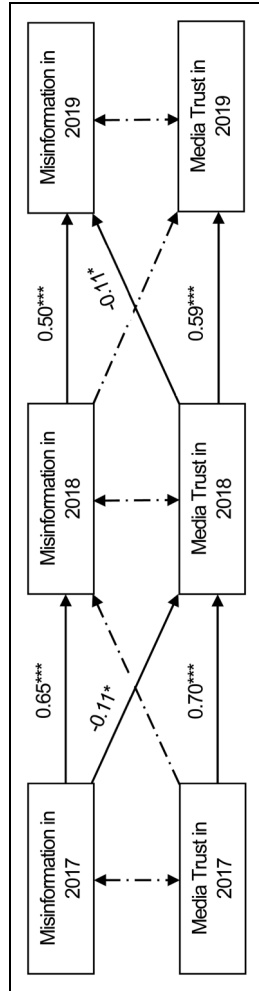


Figure 1. Lagged model of misinformation and media trust.

Note. Values are unstandardized estimates. Only values for significant paths are displayed. Solid lines represent statistically significant paths. Dashed lines represent nonsignificant paths. Control variables are included in the estimation but are not displayed. See Tables A4 and A5 in the Supplemental Information file for full model results. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Table 1. Reciprocal Influences of Misinformation and Media Trust.

Parameters	Estimates (SE)	Parameters	Estimates (SE)	z-difference
Misinformation ₂₀₁₇ →Media trust ₂₀₁₈	-0.108* (0.043)	Misinformation ₂₀₁₈ →Media Trust ₂₀₁₉	0.006 (0.038)	1.99*
Media trust ₂₀₁₇ →Misinformation ₂₀₁₈	-0.051 (0.055)	Media Trust ₂₀₁₈ →Misinformation ₂₀₁₉	-0.113* (0.056)	-0.79
z-difference	0.82		-1.75	

Note. Entries are unstandardized estimates; z-difference represents the result of significance tests of the difference between parameters in a row and in a line, respectively.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

Table 2. Indirect Effects of Misinformation and Media Trust.

	<i>b</i> (SE)	95 percent bias-corrected bootstrap CI
Specific indirect effects:		
Misinformation ₂₀₁₇ →Misinformation ₂₀₁₈ →Misinformation ₂₀₁₉	0.324*** (0.043)	0.214 to 0.434
Misinformation ₂₀₁₇ →Media trust ₂₀₁₈ →Misinformation ₂₀₁₉	0.012 (0.008)	−0.006 to 0.030
Media trust ₂₀₁₇ →Media trust ₂₀₁₈ →Media trust ₂₀₁₉	0.414*** (0.039)	0.325 to 0.503
Media trust ₂₀₁₇ →Misinformation ₂₀₁₈ →Media trust ₂₀₁₉	−0.001 (0.002)	−0.004 to 0.003
Total indirect effects:		
Misinformation ₂₀₁₇ →Misinformation ₂₀₁₉	0.337*** (0.043)	0.230 to 0.443
Media trust ₂₀₁₇ →Media trust ₂₀₁₉	0.414*** (0.039)	0.324 to 0.503
Misinformation ₂₀₁₇ →Media trust ₂₀₁₉	−0.060 (0.035)	−0.122 to 0.003
Media trust ₂₀₁₇ →Misinformation ₂₀₁₉	−0.105* (0.048)	−0.209 to −0.001

Note. Table reports unstandardized coefficients (*b*), standard errors (SE), and bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals (CI) based on 1,000 bootstrap samples for the specified indirect effects shown in Figure 1.

p* < .05; *p* < .01; ****p* < .001.

individuals who were more misinformed in 2017 had less trust in mainstream media by 2018. In turn, individuals who trusted the news media less in 2018 became more misinformed by 2019. Based on the RSM (Slater et al. 2020), we expected to find a positive feedback loop between misinformation and media skepticism, such that both variables would mutually influence each other over time. Although we found plausible evidence of a negative correlation of misinformation and media trust, this relationship grew weaker over the two-year period under study. Furthermore, we did not find evidence for a self-reinforcing process fueled by media trust. That is, media trust in 2017 did not inoculate respondents against becoming misinformed in 2018, just as being misinformed in 2018 was not associated with an increase in media skepticism by 2019.

On its surface, our evidence is inconsistent with the notion of reinforcing spirals. Certainly, we are not the first study to fail in finding positive feedback loops based on the RSM. For instance, Beam et al. (2018) studied the effects of Facebook news use on affective polarization in the United States and found no evidence of a partisan reinforcing spiral resulting in increased polarization. Instead, they found the opposite result: users who were less polarized to begin with depolarized further due to counter-attitudinal news exposure on the social network site. Still, a tenet of the RSM is that positive feedback loops between media use and attitudes are the exception rather than the rule. This is because increases in media selectivity that could trigger attitude reinforcement are expected during specific circumstances, such as when new social identity threats emerge. These threats may be activated by changes in the political landscape, a hostile climate of opinion, or exposure to oppositional media content, among other influences (Long et al. 2019). Often, however, media use and attitudes are at an equilibrium, not moving to the extremes.

Based on the core assumptions of the RSM, we can think of two possible explanations for the mixed findings of our study. First, media trust (or media skepticism) may be rather peripheral to the personal and social identities of survey respondents. Studies using the RSM that have found evidence of significant reinforcement effects have explored attitudes and beliefs that have wide-ranging consequences, such as political ideology, gender orientations and lifestyle beliefs and values (Slater et al. 2020). To the degree that attitudes towards the news media are far removed from people's identities, the likelihood of perceiving an identity threat that could trigger a process of selectivity and reinforcement may be diminished. Second, it is not clear whether users can select media sources that spread misinformation even when they are motivated to do so. Compared to verified news, the supply and consumption of sources spreading fabricated, misleading content is relatively small (Nelson and Taneja 2018). In that sense, our study is no exception. Thus, when the mainstream media activates an identity threat that may motivate users to seek alternative media, users may not succeed at finding these sources or may satisfice without turning to low-quality sources.

Although our findings do not show consistent evidence of a reinforcing spiral, it is still the case that significant long-term relationships between misinformation and media trust were found. More specifically, the negative correlation between misinformation in 2017 and media trust in 2018 dissipated by 2019. This result suggests that misinformation may have had its greatest impact between 2017 and 2018, when it

was a rather new phenomenon for media users in Chile. This interpretation is in line with some longitudinal studies on misinformation, such as research showing that exposure to political misinformation in the United States has diminished over time (Guess et al. 2018).

Nevertheless, a note of caution should be sounded when highlighting cross-national similarities. Unlike most studies on misinformation effects conducted in the United States, we fielded our surveys during nonelection periods. It is possible that factually dubious information has a larger impact on attitudes towards the news media during elections. Furthermore, Chile has yet to witness the proliferation of the hyperpartisan, “fake news” websites that typically supply incorrect information in countries of the global north and that vocally promote mistrust on the mainstream media. This difference may explain the rather weak association of misinformation with media trust found in Chile compared to the United States. Recall that Ognyanova et al. (2020) found that Americans’ exposure to misinformation during a one-month period predicted a 5 percent decrease in media trust. In our case, we found an average 11 percent decrease between waves, that is, -0.8 percent monthly.

Our results contribute to existing research on misinformation, media trust, and reinforcing spirals in several ways. Prior work has found mixed evidence about the nature and causal direction of the link between misinformation and media trust (Guess et al. 2020; Ognyanova et al. 2020; Wasserman and Madrid-Morales 2019). Our study suggests that the negative relationship between misinformation and media trust can be as much a media effect (i.e., the more users are exposed to misinformation, the less trust they have on the news media) as it may be a self-selection effect (i.e., the more users are skeptical of the news media, the more exposed they are to misinformation). Furthermore, our results provide new insights on how trust in professional news matters in the contemporary media environment. It has been argued that high levels of media trust can inoculate societies against the threats posed by misinformation (Humprecht et al. 2020). We find modest evidence corroborating this possibility using individual-level data. In doing so, we provided a test of the RSM in a country of the global south—a different context than most available work. While we did not find strong evidence of a reinforcement spiral, the RSM provided a valuable theoretical tool for studying the complex phenomenon of misinformation, as it can accommodate in a single framework the antecedents, consequences, and temporal dynamics of misinformation.

As in any study, there are some limitations that future research needs to address. The rather small sample size of the survey, coupled with the use of a quota sample, means that the risk of a Type II error (i.e., an error of omission) is higher in our study compared to one employing a large, representative sample. In other words, caution is needed when generalizing our findings. Each of the panel waves was fielded approximately one year apart, making the initial and final waves fall more than two years apart. These significant gaps in time, while increasing the possibility of variance in rather stable constructs such as media trust, increases the odds of interceding events playing a role in the causal-effects relationships by introducing additional confounds. Thus, future research should replicate these results using a shorter time-lag between waves, such as during a political campaign. While our key variables were reliably

measured, they are far from perfect. We treated media trust and media credibility as synonymous but other researchers conceive media trust as a dimension of media credibility (West 1994). Likewise, we integrated into a single measure misinformation about a diverse set of topics, including politics, crime, science, and natural disasters. Although this may be a strength of the study—as it permits generalizing across topics—it may be a limitation as it prevents us from focusing on the particularities of misinformation regarding any one issue.

Furthermore, relying on self-reports of misinformation, especially when asking about individual items, can lead to biased estimations due to faulty recall. Likewise, our method does not allow us to know when respondents were exposed to any of the false claims. While there are ways of reducing the problem of recall (e.g., Allcott and Gentzkow 2017), future research may avoid it altogether by examining digital trace data, such as web visiting, in combination with survey information. Another issue that we did not control for was the conditioning that may have occurred by repeatedly asking respondents about the same claims. Still, given the time elapsed between waves, this problem would have been attenuated.

Limitations notwithstanding, our study contributes to a nascent approach in the literature that is somewhat skeptical of the corrosive effects of misinformation on democratic regimes (Allen et al. 2020). We find that the negative relationships between misinformation and credibility of the news media in Chile are relatively weak. In this sense, our findings echo Guess et al.'s (2019) claim that, when it comes to describing the magnitude of the misinformation problem, it may be “less than you think.” Of course, future research can address the question on whether the same holds true for other attitudes and behaviors in other countries.

Looking forward, we envision two lines of work that may build upon the current study. With the explosive growth of social media use, which has facilitated access to alternative news outlets, we must reconsider how individuals assess quality standards from the news they consume. That is, the concept of media trust may need to be reconceptualized to include nonmainstream media, which at the end adds more complexity to the subject of procuring trustworthy media contents. For instance, it is possible that the relationship between misinformation and news trust operates differently for alternative media. A second direction for future research refers to examining the effects of misinformation on other attitudes and behaviors related to media trust. To the degree that media trust is connected to news media use (Strömbäck et al. 2020), it may be important to study in more depth the relationship between misinformation and exposure to news media. As Tsfatí et al. (2020) noted, only limited scholarly attention has been paid to the role of mainstream media in the dissemination of so-called fake news. A good starting point is the large existing literature on news framing and media bias—understood as partial or biased truth—in the mainstream media (see, e.g., Navia and Osorio 2015; Robertson and Mourão 2020). Similarly, it is not clear that digital media are the main conduits of misinformation. Thus, more research is required to understand how misinformation is related to media use and beliefs. Doing that will produce a better understanding of the problem of misinformation—a necessary task if scholars are to suggest solutions to it.

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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